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ABSTRACT

Questions of television's relationship to reality are discussed by two of the conference participants. The discussion focusses on two basic questions: given the time, space, and money constraints of the medium, what relationship is there between events as portrayed on television and physical reality; and what are the implications of television's mix of reality and fantasy for the picture of the world built up by television's viewers. (RH)

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TELEVISION AND REALITY: A REPORT FROM THE TELEVISION: ART AND INFORMATION MEETING.

National Center for Experiments in Television
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Television and Reality: A Report from the Television: Art and Information Meeting

Comments by Paul Kaufman and an interview with Mardi Horowitz, M.D., author of Image Formation and Cognition

What has television to do with "reality"? Reality has been defined as being made up of things which we cannot simply wish away. Most of us would not question the reality of cars, trees and rain. Other things, less material, are no less real -- values such as freedom or responsibility, concepts like neurosis or paranoia or totalitarianism. These are also realities. With a private, spiritual reality, e.g., "knowing God", we are far from some test of objective materiality, yet this kind of reality may seem to be the most "real" of all.

Where does television come into this? Television is a new form of reality. Television's structure of images and sounds may be compared to language in its capacity to describe, define and categorize the people and events of this world. It has been asserted that these images are rapidly supplementing if not supplanting words as the formal vehicles for thought and knowledge.

Who makes television? Who builds this day to day structure of reality which at any individual moment seems so ephemeral, yet which accumulates into a real presence in our minds? For the viewer,

television is a deceptively casual experience. The images are apparent, but not the complex structure which produces them.

Television is produced by institutions. Television realtiy is made by lawyers, bureaucrats, businessman and legislators as fully as it is made by actors, newsmen, producers, editors, cameramen and writers. Television springs from our laws, politics and marketplace so that as it produces images of make-believe and reality it also suggests a particular social viewpoint.

From the beginning, television has been a mixture of drama, actuality coverage, documentary and cartoons. It has also inherited whatever we have believed about images and reality. The earliest motion pictures were pure documentary efforts rather than fictional stories. They were attempts to record some real event, usually something in motion. They worked; they were believable. Before that we had the essential wonder of photography itself, the possibility that reality in the form of light could record itself on a sensitive surface. But, we also inherited mixed feelings about images -- ancient religious and philosophic prohibitions, warnings that images are deceptive shadows and replicas which stand apart from and obscure deeper truths. To improve one's "image" suggests a camouflage of the true self. As surfaces, images suffer the disrespect born of the conviction that truth lies hidden behind exteriors and surfaces. At the same time, we have other sorts of wisdom like "seeing is believing," and "pictures don't lie."

Overriding all of this is our practical need for images. This leads us to suspend whatever disbelief we may have in our viewing of television. Whitehead (Alfred North, not Clay) wrote: "Our problem is, in fact, to fit the world to our perceptions, and not our perceptions to the world." Television images do not so much mirror the world as they serve as a perceptual world through which, hopefully, we may discover the truth about a variety of things. As such we ought to take this medium as seriously as we take education, psychotherapy, science or art.

There are individuals motivated to take a questioning stance toward the medium: among them, documentary producers who are concerned about the truth and objectivity of their work, psychiatrists and psychologists whose studies have drawn them to a consideration of images as part of thought, perception and human consciousness, and television managers who must make legal and ethical judgements about what is and is not seen. Such a group met in Asilomar, California, for several days in June, 1973, under the aegis of the National Center for Experiments in Television. As chairman of the meeting, it became my practice to corner individual participants outside the general sessions in order to obtain more detailed views on a subject for which they might have special knowledge. One of the principal matters which continued to emerge whichever videotaped program we viewed -- and we looked at a range of work including some BBC docu-dramas, CBS Reports, An American Family, cinema verité and televised theater -- was the essential viewing psychology of television. What were we doing with those images?

How do they become part of ourselves?

One afternoon I interviewed Dr. Mardi Horowitz, a psychiatrist and professor at the University of California Medical School, San Francisco. I had first met Dr. Horowitz when he was conducting studies of mental images brought about by the viewing of stressful films. Since then his book, Image Formation and Cognition, has been published by Appleton Century Crofts. We began by attempting to elicit a general view of television and reality:

KAUFMAN: We seem to know reality, natively and intuitively: "I am here in this room and you are with me. I know that I I am real and you are real." I know that the images moving on the television screen are also real. They are there as much as the chair and the lamp is there. Television, however, brings images and sounds from elsewhere, breaking both the spatial and temporal structure of everyday consciousness.

HOROWITZ: In the past, if you witnessed an event you had only one key problem: was this event reality, or were you hallucinating or dreaming it? For centuries that was the preoccupation: What reports are real and which stem from visionary experiences of holy or unholy origin? Which were sane or which were derivatives of madness? Now it is possible for a person to be witnessing something that is authentic and real -- a television documentary -- while

he is in the reality state. He is not hallucinating or dreaming. He is really perceiving something. Nonetheless the images he is really perceiving may have been distorted from reality or have only a semblance of reality.

KAUFMAN: Seeing images that certainly appear real but may be real only in a new, special sense then is the result of the new technologies of image making such as television.

HOROWITZ: Yes, We can break it down further to clarify the matter. There's the original event. Then there's the storage which is corruptable and changeable, createable and recreateable. Then, on the other end of it is the audience which will see the images. The producer's responsibility lies between the event and the reproduction of the event for the audience. His selection of the coded images creates an historically unusual potential for corruption of real meanings. This unusual option for an artist or essayist -- that of being an intermediary between a real event and the experience of the event by another -- creates a host of problems.

It's possible now to combine fragments of reality together, to make new and different things which may be

composites of the real, the unreal or the meta-real (a new kind of "reality"). Artists in the past had some of that seemingly magical power because they could pose models and they could paint from life. For example, they could take a sequence of models and end up with a painting of a scene that never "really" existed in that form. Nonetheless, everyone knew it was paint and didn't think that the painting was faithful to an explicit reality other than its own "reality". Nowadays people are still conditioned by idiomatic statements like "Pictures don't lie," or "I saw it on television." If the image is presented by an authoritative person and indicated to be "the news", then viewers operate in the context that this is an authentic picture. It doesn't "lie", but it may not replicate the earlier real events with accuracy.

The distortion of that picture -- even though authentic in fragmentary form -- by its positioning in the flow of ideas, makes an enormous difference. Let's say we're at the Berkeley riots. During the late 60's the confrontations between the police and the students were boring most of the time. Nothing was happening. There were areas of the campus where no activity was occurring and business was going on as usual, or there were just people

sitting around. That wasn't dramatic, and if you have a medium where time is money, you select only the dramatic events. So the news might consist of two seconds of rock throwing, four seconds of teargassing, a minute or two of belly clubbing, forty seconds of radical talk and angry confrontation, and that would be the news. Now, that was all accurate -- it presented what had happened -- but it didn't present the entire linear context of those days.

KAUFMAN: Has this tendency toward drama, towards encapsulation, distorted emotional life and psychic life as presented on television?

HOROWITZ: It's distorted the life of the senses in terms of exaggerating the importance of action. The television "essay" tends to minimize what the written essay tends to exaggerate. The written essay can depict in exquisite detail and nuance the life of internal experiences such as the qualities and flow of thoughts and feelings. The image in television extols external experiences, those behavioral events which are shared by people, and it minimizes internal experiences which are private to the individual. There has to be a great deal of action on television for it to be interesting to a mass of people. I

think that's one reason why some of the news broadcasts have tended to introduce commentary; it's only there that you begin to add the information which might compose internal experiences -- the abstractions and contemplations of what's behind the scenes, the meaning behind the phenomenological moving world to be depicted, the motivations of the actors upon the world stage.

KAUFMAN: Within the reality presentation itself there are problems of seeing authentic or real pictures in a new, or meta-real context which substantially alters their reality. There is also the distortion of the life of the senses by an overuse of action, the visible world in great motion. None of this is new to makers and students of film -- neither the powers of montage and creative juxtaposition of images, nor the "sheer delight in the fact that things seemed to move," which the critic Erwin Panofsky called the basis of our enjoyment of films.

It is television's daily presentation in our homes of both the world of actual, real people and events, along with the film world of make-believe and fantasy, that creates a new condition. Going to a movie house or entering a theater provides a formal transition between our everyday real world and another kind of event. Television

comes to us, bringing into our homes a continuous flow of reality and fantasy. Reality news programs, which themselves are interspersed with fantasy commercials, are preceded by fantasy movies and followed by fantasy situation comedies or police shows. Does this have the effect of blurring fantasy and reality in our own minds?

HOROWITZ: I think it decidedly does and moreso because it does so in a profound way which we don't fully realize. It creates the reality-fantasy problem again in a way never really before possible -- except the way mirrors perhaps create for the child that question of reality and fantasy -- a series of paradoxes a little like looking from a barber's mirror into another mirror into another mirror, not being sure which mirror you're seeing, or how many times removed the reflection is, or whether it's a reversal or not a reversal.

Let's take the news as an analogy, because I think most people suppose it to be and wish it to be "authentic." When you have a documentary image being presented, the viewer is always dealing with the new perceptions in two ways. One is his automatically conditioned thought where he associates one context with another; the other process,

slower, but more realistic in the long run, is the kind of problem-solving thought where the person analyzes towards a goal (such as the reduction of an incongruity between the "news" and former attitudes). In terms of automatic thought, a viewer is going to associate information he is receiving from the TV image with all other things that come from that glass box which are fantasy stories. That association alone will tend to blur the distinction between reality and fantasy. Moreover, the person usually knows the "news" is not really happening now, it is only a recording of what happened earlier. Third, the viewer is not in the presence of the people he is watching so that he is not having those automatic social responses one would have if one were there and "really" "there" for the viewer. Even in the theater one has certain human responses, reflexively conditioned responses to the people on the stage which will alter our state of thinking because it alters our state of arousal. If a person, for example, were on a battlefield, even as an observer, he'd be aroused, frightened, terrified, exalted, or whatever. He'd be activated by the fact that he was there and responding to the entire environment.

For the person who is watching a newsreel of combat -- he may be doing it in an easy chair, drinking a beer, with his feet up on the sofa after a hard day's work -- it's not the same experience even though it's an authentic bit of film he's seeing. And this blurs reality and fantasy because it's real, but in a glass box that sometimes produces fantasy, and is being experienced by a person who may be in a mood for fantasy. He may, however, be trying to make himself see it as real. As a result, there will be a kind of jarring oscillation back and forth between reality and fantasy. To further complicate matters, the interruptions of commercials bring their own diffusions of reality and fantasy.

KAUFMAN: Might this ambivalence of viewing states and the isolation of the viewer from the act produce passivity among viewers?

HOROWITZ: I'm not worried about the species as a whole. There are enough people so that there's a spectrum of response to any stimulus and some people who will be stimulated by television, receive enormous amounts of information, and use it for effective actions. But in terms of a kind of average expectable character, I would share some of that

concern. The image, in ordinary life, is an experience orchestrated with all kinds of other sensations, perceptions, thoughts and acts. The problem with television is that it isolates. It takes and isolates only two kinds of imagery, auditory and visual imagery. And it gives you only a fragment of even these modes of experience while encouraging you to do nothing. So that it's easy; it is not an overstimulating instrument, by and large; it's an understimulating instrument because it provides enough stimulation so that the viewer becomes passive in response, avoiding his own contemplation, dialogues with others, plans and actions.

KAUFMAN: Under these conditions, would it seem likely that people are highly manipulable through television?

HOROWITZ: It's beyond question that people are continuously shaped and manipulated by the kind of information they are presented with. Of course, they are protected in part by the past information they have been given. But the constant repetition of information is inevitably going to shape them, no matter how discriminating and sensitive and thoughtful they may be. A balance of information in one direction will sway a person in some way. It may not be in that

direction; it may be in opposition to it, but it will determine what one's preoccupations are. For example, suppose a dictatorship is trying to manipulate a political idea and trying to present it by innuendo. There might be a few people who would see through this, continue receiving that information, and take an opposite point of view, but they would still be shaped in that the area of their preoccupation would be bound to be the area where the superabundance of information was provided.

KAUFMAN: So it would seem that one way television can manipulate us is by providing an abundance of similar materials which, despite our best efforts, come to occupy our minds. Our moral and intellectual gatekeepers, our reasoning faculties, are perhaps, with television, underwhelmed. The emotional state in which we are at any given moment of viewing also influences whether or not images remain with us. Some important information can sail right by us while visual trivia catching us in an important junction in our lives will really sink in. Repetition is also a factor in giving the image a permament effect on us.

HOROWITZ: Repetition also gives information the semblance of authenticity. We doubt something we've seen once but

if we see it two or three times, we say, "well, that's the way it is." I think it's probably an energy-saving matter. If things are staying the same there's no point in thinking about it. We probably check things once or twice to make sure they're stable. Once they're stable, we have some way of just humming along with them and re-checking them only more and more intermittently, and then we don't get our alarm systems turned on until they change.

KAUFMAN: Does this mean that the more something is repeated, however untrue, the more it begins to take on a credibility?

HOROWITZ: I'd say there was in intermediary step in which it just takes on conceptual "space." The bigger the lie -- the more important the person that said it, the louder he yelled it, the more times he has repeated it, the more conceptual space it has and the more it operates -- the harder it will be for me to restrict my responses to rational, conscious, problem-solving thought.

KAUFMAN: Our understanding of television reality is aided by this notion of conceptual space. This increasing space is filled by an enormous quantity of diverse, repetitive material. Upon careful scrutiny each single part of the

television experience appears to be fleeting and insubstantial. But, the mass eventually gets into us, influencing the topics of preoccupation if not directly modifying opinions, values and behavior. Of course, we are protected from "television reality" by all of the other realities in our lives, which are eversomuch more vivid if we allow them to be experienced fully. Our face to face relationships, the daily activities of work, our reading, our private reflections and meditations are much more powerful than TV if they are not avoided or inhibited.

The reality of the world beyond face to face relationships is increasingly given structure and meaning in television. We depend upon this medium for truthful insights into this world beyond our immediate lives. Thus far, we have been examining the idea of reality and television. What has "truth" to do with television? Can there be "objectivity" with respect to television? We think we know what objectivity means when it is used with respect to physical science. We can talk of truth with respect to a logical proposition. What is truthfulness in television's melange of pictures, words, sounds, movements, shifting contents and viewing states? In a subsequent paper we will examine this question as viewed by several psychologists, producers of documentaries and a manager of a broadcast station.

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